

## EUROFILE SPORT

A new documentary about the former Arsenal manager reveals a man still in love with the club, but also still heartbroken by it. By

**JASON SOLOMONS**



“The meaning of my life is football and that is frightening, perhaps I loved it too much,” says Arsene Wenger at the start of a new documentary about his remarkable achievements in football management.

*Arsene Wenger: Invincible* is about balls, but the human kind more than the ones hitting the back of a net. It’s about obsession, perfection, driving ambition and bitter defeat.

It’s also a very personal film for me, one that weaves together so many elements of my past, and there is something wonderfully fitting in the fact that I am waiting to go on stage at the film’s premiere in Finsbury Park alongside co-directors Gabriel Clarke and Christian Jeanpierre.

Clarke is well-known in the UK as ITV Sport’s touchline reporter, Jeanpierre is the face of the weekly French football show *Telefoot*, which has included punditry supplied by Arsene Wenger. As if that’s not enough, we are just a few football pitch lengths away from Highbury, scene of some of Wenger’s greatest triumphs.

Jeanpierre, Clarke and I discuss the film and the legend we are about to interview in front of an audience which includes former and current Arsenal luminaries.

“When you commentate with Arsene, you learn about football,” Jeanpierre tells me. “You see a new aspect of the game every match, or spot something new in the character of a player. But making this film with Arsene, I learned about life.”



Only a few days earlier, Clarke was covering a first round FA Cup tie between Sheffield Wednesday and Plymouth Argyle. It finished 0-0. In the morning, he’s off to grab a few minutes with England’s Declan Rice.

But alongside this, Clarke has developed an impressive career as a documentary filmmaker. I knew him slightly when I was a football reporter at the *Daily Express* but reconnected with him at the Cannes Film Festival in 2015 where his debut cinema documentary *Steve McQueen – The Man & Le Mans* was being screened. Since then he’s made award-winning films about Bobby Robson and, more recently, the England World Cup winner and Republic of Ireland manager in *Finding Jack Charlton*.

Clarke is pacing like an expectant father, hoping that Wenger, who’s watching the finished film for the



# THE INVINCIBLE MAN

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Arsene Wenger watches documentary footage of himself lifting the Premier League trophy during the filming of *Invincible* Photo: Wlad Simitch



Arsene Wenger in the Highbury stand after being appointed Arsenal manager in 1996 Photo: Colorsport / Andrew Cowie



Wenger disputes a decision during a home game against Norwich City in 2016 Photo: Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC via Getty Images

first time, is satisfied with the outcome. In fact, the filmmakers made two films at once, one in French, the other in English, with Wenger basically recording his interview answers first in one language, then the other.

What strikes me is the Anglo-French nature of the enterprise. There are establishing shots of my neighbourhood, of Highbury and the Emirates, of Islington Town Hall where the Arsenal team show off their trophies in front of my children's primary school, and there's Arsene jogging through the woods in Tottenham where he still has a home – and where my parents go for their daily walk.

But there are also smart Paris streets and the little alleys of Duttlenheim, about 12 miles from

Strasbourg, where Wenger grew up.

The film focuses on the environment around the man, an environment which he clearly affects with his achievements, his charisma and philosophy.

I lived in Islington before, during and after the Wenger years at Arsenal and I can tell you that not only did the football get better, but the food improved, the coffee tasted nicer and the price of houses rose.

“Great men impact on their time, their surroundings and on the people,” says Clarke. “I saw that with Brian Clough at Forest and with Jack Charlton. Arsene definitely altered this corner of North London.” The fact that we are sitting in a boutique cinema, in what used to be a grotty spot behind Finsbury Park station, is evidence of that.

Wenger's arrival at Arsenal in October 1996 coincided with the rise of New Labour and an increasingly cosmopolitan outlook in London where an influx of Europeans chasing a slice of “Cool Britannia” all helped alter the landscape.

Under Wenger, Islington became a corner of France. He brought in players such as Patrick Vieira, Thierry Henry, Robert Pires, Sylvain Wiltord, Nicolas Anelka and Emmanuel Petit. “Arsenal was like the second French team,” remembers Jeanpierre. “Every match was suddenly on French television, all the news was about Arsenal, even more than our own teams PSG or Marseille. For the French, what was happening in London was a little miracle.”

When France won the World Cup

in Paris in 1998, it felt as if Arsenal had won it, too.

While concentrating on the football and the manager, the film nevertheless gives a real sense of a kind of utopian immigration model, a forging of success using the underlying bedrock of the more senior Arsenal players such as Tony Adams, Martin Keown, Lee Dixon, Ian Wright and Ray Parlour while adding European flair with the Dutch players Dennis Bergkamp and Marc Overmars.

“You could say it was an example of perfect immigration,” says Wenger in the film. “Creating something new and improved, but only by respecting local values.”

In a Q&A after the screening, he expands further. “From 1996 it was a French influence but after 2000 it was a multi-cultural team, people coming from all over the world, and English society was changing with that. The club went from English owners to global ownership and that happened throughout the league. When I arrived I was the only foreign manager, but now it is hard to find many English managers and many of the clubs are globally owned. It's a worldwide league.”



What's clear is that Wenger loved Arsenal. He loved the tradition of Highbury, with its marble halls and tiny corridors and art-deco, architecturally listed stands, and he loved the fighting spirit of English football and the long history.

He is enormously proud of the fact that he won seven FA Cups, more than any other manager. For a Frenchman, the FA Cup, more than any other trophy, has always symbolised English football. “Until Arsene arrived at Arsenal,” says Jeanpierre, “almost the only English football we would cover on French television would be the FA Cup Final. It was a famous event, so it is no surprise to us that he took it so seriously.”

But the film's main focus is on the construction of the side that would become known as The Invincibles, Wenger's team that went through the 2003-04 season undefeated on their way to the title. A feat that had never been achieved in the modern era, and has still not been matched, even by the recent imperious Liverpool, Manchester City or Chelsea teams.

As even Wenger's former arch rival Sir Alex Ferguson admits in the film: “I never came close to going a whole season unbeaten, that's an achievement on another level, that stands apart and it belongs to Arsenal.”

Gabriel Clarke says: “Sir Alex pushed Arsene and Arsene pushed Sir Alex. Their rivalry was so

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Arsene Wenger with the Premier League trophy and the FA Cup in 2002  
Photo: Stuart MacFarlane/Arsenal FC via Getty Images

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intense because it kept making them want to go one better than the other. We had to have him in the film but we were a bit surprised he said yes and by how he'd softened in terms of finally confessing his respect for Arsene."

So the film has got a baddie in Sir Alex and tightrope moments when the flawless masterpiece is endangered (the last-minute penalty miss by Ruud van Nistelrooy for Manchester United at Old Trafford, for example). But it has added jeopardy because, as is famous, Wenger states his dream of going a whole season without losing quite early on, during a previous unbeaten run. He was widely derided for doing so, by the press and players, the former accusing him of arrogance, the latter for burdening them with such pressure.

But the film is also a romance. It's clear Wenger adored his Arsenal. Perhaps too much. Love became an all-consuming passion.

I ask Wenger how he would describe the relationship. "It's a love story that on my side will never stop," he says. "I arrived here at 47 years old and stayed until 69. I gave this club the best years of my life and I'm happy for that. Arsenal loved me back and allowed me to achieve my dream and make my team with no compromises."

However, the film doesn't shirk from showing the bruises of that

love, too, the pain of the final years when, despite more FA Cup wins in 2014, 2015 and 2017, amid falling league table positions, the crowd turned against him and the club hierarchy eventually felt compelled to let Arsene go at the end of the 2018 season. He describes his final game as like being at his own funeral.

In the film, he also utters an extraordinary line about the Emirates stadium he, in effect, built and agitated for and which, with its excavations and accrued debts, physically altered the landscape of an entire area of London. He says: "Highbury was my soul, the Emirates was my suffering."



What a line. What a devastating sadness, but I think I know what he means. The move to the Emirates lessened the team financially, and, although he kept Arsenal among the European elite by still qualifying for the Champions League every season, they never looked like winning the Premier League again.

But despite the pain of being let go by the club, he is still in love with Arsenal. "My life is red and white and that will remain," he says.

Arsenal fans know Wenger has not returned to the Emirates since that last day, but now he speaks warmly of the future for the first time. He looks out to the audience, where current Arsenal manager (and captain of his own 2014 FA Cup winners) Mikel Arteta is a surprise

attendee. "Mikel is here tonight and I have to say to him that the basis is there for the club to be successful again, a great training ground, a top stadium that is paid for. It's all there and he has the responsibility and the possibility to make another invincible team."

Full of motivational maxims and zen sayings on life, football, success and defeat, the film might well prove to be a kind of therapy. But the night of the premiere itself was also significant, evidence of a broken heart that might be on the mend.

On a personal note, it dawned on me on the way to the cinema: I was about to interview Arsene Wenger as a film reporter. However, many years ago, when I was covering football, I had spoken to him shortly before he took up the Arsenal job.

I'm also a lifelong Arsenal fan, first taken to Highbury in 1975 by my father who, in turn, had been taken there by his father in 1947. Furthermore, I've got a French degree and lived in Paris for a year, becoming obsessed with French film and French football. I even watched Wenger's Monaco side play.

So here I was, in my local patch, with my French translation skills needed for Jeanpierre, who I'd watched host French TV shows, and with Gabriel Clarke, whose own father's films (Alan Clarke directed tough classics such as *Scum*) had been influential on me.

I also feature briefly in the film, on one of my early assignments as a young reporter, having to go to the

famous Highbury steps for an impromptu press conference at which the Arsenal manager was going to defend himself against rumours about his private life.

After the Q&A, I didn't mention this incident but instead told Arsene the story about how, when he was still manager of Nagoya Grampus Eight in Japan, a French journalist friend from sports daily *L'Equipe* had given me his phone number.

Sitting at the sports desk of the *Daily Express*, I'd called it, not expecting him to pick up. But sure enough, he did. And we had a chat, out of which I'd got a decent story for the back page.

But after that he asked me for my opinion on his future team. "What should I do when I get to Arsenal? How is the team?"

I told him in no uncertain terms: "You have to get rid of that back four," referring to the legendary Arsenal defence including Tony Adams and Lee Dixon, that had won league titles a few years earlier under George Graham.

"They're old now, and too slow," I said. Arsene listened, calmly, taking all my advice in. Of course when he arrived, he immediately made that ageing back four the cornerstone of his first league and FA Cup double-winning team in 1998.

And that's why, by then, I'd become a film critic.

■ *Arsene Wenger: Invincible* is in UK cinemas from 12 November and available on Blu-Ray DVD and Digital Download now